

Social media, beauty standards and the discriminatory bias in body transformation practices: a commentary on why posthuman thinking matters

Mídias sociais, padrões de beleza e o viés discriminatório nas práticas de transformação corporal: um comentário sobre a importância do pensamento pós-humano

Las redes sociales, los estándares de belleza y el sesgo discriminatorio en las prácticas de transformación corporal: un comentario sobre por qué es importante el pensamiento posthumano

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In “We post-humans: from genesis to freedom”, Pussetti critically reflects on the meaning of what we can understand today as “human” following, in particular, the growing use of medical biotechnologies (such as endocrinology, genetic engineering, cosmetic surgery, and dermatology) for betterment purposes. While the history of the human species has always been accompanied by practices of body transformation due to humans’ inherent aspiration and tension to construct, alter and improve their own selves, the contemporary proliferation of less invasive and low-cost cosmetic procedures has provided us incredible chances of transform-ability and new opportunities of “molding” the body we would like to have. Drawing from Remotti’s¹ concept of anthropo-poiesis, which indicates the various processes of self-construction of the individual particularly from the point of view of body modification, Pussetti argue that we are actively engaged in a continuous process of self-construction thanks to socialization, acculturation, and our deliberate practices of body modifications. A feeling of incompleteness spurs



our imagination and drives us to creatively explore new ways of being and aspire to ideals we are encouraged to meet, responding to the economic demands and socio-cultural expectations of the society we live in. Taken in a dialogical relationship, we alter our body and self in a continuous process of adaptation to, reinvention of, and resistance to the world around us. The idea according to which we have always been posthuman - not only because of our intimate and mutual relationship with our non-human others but first and foremost because we are always moving towards a future vision of ourselves - is not new².

Pussetti's original contribution lies in her focus on the biopolitical and social implications of cosmetic procedures in practices of self-transformation and body modification, and the role of social media applications - such as Instagram - as mediators of hegemonic models of beauty, success, competitiveness, and high-standard performance. These hegemonic ideals incorporate, promote and reinforce discriminatory and racialized bias. In this sense, our anthropo-poietic endeavor is subjugated to extreme individualism and materialistic consumerism and its telos (inherent purpose) is to aspire to a body image modeled by hegemonic depictions of beauty and to specific lifestyles associated with the idea of success. Even knowing how 'perfect bodies' on Instagram and social media platforms are often highly edited and manipulated, we consume a normative and standardized (visual) beauty culture and its beauty products and lifestyle and equally expose images of our bodies to followers, thus turning ourselves into consumable objects of others' voyeuristic gaze. Individualism, narcissism, perfectionism: they are all figures of loneliness. The dialogical other here is missing. Socialization has boiled down to its digital semblance.

According to Pussetti³ a new "*homo plasticus*" emerges:

Homo plasticus is a "transformer", a phenomenon in progress, changing and constantly adapting to the expectations and demands of the public, which circulates in an ambivalent space between the impossible ideal image and the concrete body; the synthetic and the somatic, the illusion and the reality, the fantasy and the desire, the object of consumption and the consuming subject, the virtual and the real, the public and the private. (p. 11, translation is mine)

Since the so-called digital revolution, which began in the latter half of the 20th century and continues to the present day, our daily life is extensively affected by and intertwined with virtual reality. The culture that this latter conveys can incorporate violent and discriminatory values - such as racialized beauty ideal that preference Eurocentric features over that of Afrocentric features, body commodification, ideals of perfection and personal success - that can be truly detrimental to our well-being.

But how the body design market (such as plastic surgery for instance) mobilizes a racialized 'beauty myth' and how this latter represents a key trope in Portuguese national identity, considering its colonial history? The text overlooks some references that discussed the moral dimension of beauty and that could have enriched the debate in a comparative perspective. For instance, Edmonds and Leem⁴ have discussed how race has been enacted differently in the three national contexts with large cosmetic surgery markets (the US, Korea, and Brazil) according to the changing politics



of difference and beauty ideals. Similarly, the volume edited by Heilborn⁵ addresses how in modern western societies the construction of the self (especially of women) has gravitated around sexuality and sensuality. Equally important is the recent debate on the role played by media in the context of ethnic and racial studies (cf. Special issue on Race and Media published in the *Ethnic and Racial Studies Journal*⁶); media indeed are increasingly influential systems of power and knowledge that matter not only to politics and institutions but also to public culture and recognition. It is then crucial to address their role in shaping public discourses and debates about race and racism.

The emergence of social networks has proved their usefulness insofar as they have made possible connection and communication where there was no possibility of face-to-face interaction and meeting. But these intermediary devices have also isolated our bodies and subjugated them to ideals of perfection and related discursive regimes that seem far from make us healthy or happy. Pussetti's reflection does more than focus on the possible ethical concerns of our relationship with (bio)technologies and its implications for humanity; she looks at the emergence of a wider socio-political issue: the hegemonic and normative ideals of beauty and perfection characterizing contemporary practices of body transformation and design incorporate and reproduce discriminatory and racializing conceptualizations of both body and identity. The author then advocates the urgency to address the historical and socio-cultural conditions underlying these high standards of performance and beauty required by our society, as well as to explore the biopolitical and affective dimensions implicit in the desire to ameliorate determinate psychical or behavioral traits.

I acknowledge the author's choice of using the notion of posthuman in order to show the different extents of the complexity of the phenomenon she analyzed; the "post" in posthuman indicates first and foremost an alive and open notion of the human that cannot be pacified in the language⁷. Posthuman thinking helps us to recognize the creative strengths of non-normative bodies or racialized subjects - subjected to endless tentatives of domestication - insofar as it questions the central and dominant position that certain privileged categories of humans – man, white, Caucasian – have occupied and still occupy in the public sphere. Borrowing Bachelard's definition of anthropocentrism as an "epistemological obstacle"⁸, I argue that by promoting a predetermined idea of what a body is or should be, normative conceptualizations of beauty and performance repress and silence the disruptive and creative variety of experience of living (through) different bodies and identities. We live our body as the *lieu par excellence* of continuous processes of transformation. As the same concepts (and aspirations) of well-being, happiness or betterment are increasingly shaped by forms of individualism, consumerism, and commodification, we are now called to face complex challenges. Ideals of perfection responding to normative standards of beauty and performance could determine misleading paths of self-transformation and leave humans with a sick telos, one that eludes any horizon of self-care and solidarity. Rethinking the human today means imagine an ethos in which humans are committed in a continuous exercise to go beyond their individualistic purposes and embrace community and solidarity values. Therefore, it is necessary to reflect and rely on our anthropo-poietic ability to create new shared models of collective values and critically confront and transcend the social, political, and economic forces of our hegemonic vision of society.



Conflict of interest

The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

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